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SECURITY INFORMATION

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OFFICE OF NATIONAL ESTIMATES

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SUBJECT: The Military Situation in Tonkin

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1. Since 1 November there have been two noteworthy military developments in Tonkin: (1) the French-Vietnam forces launched a limited offensive northwest from the Delta; and (2) the Viet Minh have initiated large-scale operations against French-Vietnamese forces deployed south of the Black River.

THE FRENCH-VIETNAMESE OFFENSIVE

2. The French-Vietnamese forces within the Tonkin Delta began their limited offensive on 30 October and by 14 November had reached Phu Yen. (See attached map.) A force of three parachute battalions was dropped near Phu Doan on 9 November and captured the town with negligible resistance. This limited offensive, which the French preferred to call a "reconnaissance in force," was apparently undertaken for the following purposes:

- a. To relieve the Viet Minh pressure against the Black River defense line;
- b. To entice the Viet Minh divisions into battle in open country, which is favorable to French armor and aircraft.

3. The French-Vietnamese force overran extensive supply dumps, particularly between Phu Tho and Phu Doan, and captured substantial quantities of equipment.* The capture of Phu Doan and Phu Yen severed

* Arms and ammunition captured during the operation include items of Chinese, French, American, British, Japanese, and Soviet manufacture. Included in the Soviet manufactured material were 25 tons of 120-mm. mortar shells and 4 Molotov trucks.

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important supply lines to Viet Minh units fighting in the Black River region. If the French had succeeded in holding this area, these Viet Minh units might have eventually encountered serious logistic difficulties.

4. French-Vietnamese forces, however, were not successful in enticing large Viet Minh forces to attack them where superior French artillery, armor, and aircraft could be employed. However, one Viet Minh division, which had been in a position to threaten the French forces on the Black River, was redeployed to the East in order to meet the attacking French-Vietnamese units. By 15 November, Viet Minh guerrilla activity had increased substantially in the southern part of the Tonkin Delta and the French, apparently believing that a point of diminishing returns had been reached, began a withdrawal.

5. This increase in guerrilla activity was expected. The French are greatly dependent for the defense of the Tonkin perimeter upon their six mobile groups which enable them to bring a preponderance of force to bear against any Viet Minh threat. Four of these mobile groups, consisting of 12 battalions, supported by armor, artillery, and air, were employed in the "reconnaissance-in-force" to the northwest of the perimeter. The situation within the perimeter is only slightly improved over that of last February when the French were forced to withdraw from Hoa Binh because of guerrilla activity. There are still large areas within the perimeter which are dominated by the Viet Minh. At present, it is estimated that 47,000 Viet Minh troops, including 10,000 Regulars, are disposed within the Delta.

6. On 17 November the withdrawing French-Vietnamese units were attacked by a Viet Minh force of approximately regimental size which had been redeployed from the Black River area. Viet Minh casualties as a result of this action were 400 confirmed dead. In addition, a large number of Viet Minh reportedly were killed as a result of French air action. French-Vietnamese casualties were approximately 150 killed or wounded. Also, six half-tracked vehicles, two tanks, and eight jeeps were lost. French-Vietnamese forces repulsed the attack, however, and continued their withdrawal.

7. In general, this limited French-Vietnamese operation was partially successful. A significant quantity of Viet Minh supplies

was destroyed and the redeployment of a Viet Minh division probably was helpful to the French-Vietnamese position in the Black River area.

THE BLACK RIVER SITUATION

8. The Viet Minh took the offensive on 18 November in North-west Tonkin with attacks on French-Vietnamese forces deployed south of the Black River. As a consequence, the French have pulled in their outposts and are concentrating their defenses around the airfields at Lai Chou and Na San which are vital for supply and reinforcement.

9. The objective of the Viet Minh in this offensive is apparently to pull additional French forces out of the Delta and to engage them under conditions more favorable to the Viet Minh. At the same, the French, who have reinforced their Black River forces, are seemingly confident that the Viet Minh will be repulsed with heavy losses. It is possible, however, that the Viet Minh do not intend to force an early decision in this area by frontal attacks. Having drawn large numbers of French-Vietnamese troops from the Delta, they may be content to keep them pinned down within a narrow perimeter while gradually wearing them down.

10. The outcome of the battle in this area could have important implications. If the French were forced to evacuate, probably only a small proportion of their force could be airlifted to the Delta; the remainder would have to attempt escape over jungle trails. Such a disaster could have an important deleterious effect on the whole French position in Indochina. For example, it would permit the Viet Minh to neutralize Thai resistance in the Black River area and thus pave the way for an attack on the relatively undefended Laos.

11. On the other hand, if the Viet Minh should suffer severe losses, the French situation in the Delta would be greatly improved.

CONCLUSIONS

12. Since the resumption of action in Tonkin after the seasonal lull, military developments in Tonkin have not varied from the general pattern anticipated in NIE-35/2 dated 20 August 1952. No re-estimate of the situation appears to be required at the present time. If the French should collapse in the Black River area, however, a re-evaluation of the situation would be needed.

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